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## The Interpretation of the Black Death in the Light of Christian Theology

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## **Abstract**

This study goes into the profound impact of the Black Death, which is a pandemic that devastated Europe in the fourteenth century, on the Christian theology. It examines the common belief that the plague was a punishment from God for human sinfulness and how this idea influenced people's mentality, ultimately contributing to the decline of the Catholic Church. This research explores the Christian responses to the pandemic, such as the reliance on religious rituals, penance, and appeals to God's mercy. It also explores the role of the Church in giving spiritual guidance and support to the affected ones. Additionally, it discusses how the loss of life caused by the plague weakened the Church's credibility, especially when prayers and religious rituals failed to stop the disease. This made religious authority questionable and contributed to the decline of the Catholic Church, changing people's thoughts.

**Keywords:** Black Death, Christian Theology, Failure of the church, Middle Ages, Power of Religion, Roman Catholic Church, Sins.

## **Dedications**

We dedicate this humble work to our parents, who instilled in us a love of learning and supported us every step of the way. Without their guidance and encouragement, we would not have been where we are today.

We dedicate this work, also, to:

- ❖ Our brothers and sisters.
- ❖ Every single person who helped us.



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## **General Introduction**

History is a field that records events that have already taken place in the past. It is seen as a body of knowledge and a significant aspect to writing about past events, especially people's lives and their ancient problems, it aims also to analyze the development of societies in terms of politics, economy and culture over time. It includes a wide number of themes like wars, plagues, people's movements and achievements as well as technological progress. Historians generally study the diverse origins of evidence and try to shed light on the major difficulties of human civilizations throughout different periods. In addition to that, without this discipline societies can have a shortage of collecting memories concerning their origins, their primary beliefs and the historical choices that have led to their present circumstances.

History is divided into different periods and among them the Medieval Period. The Middle Ages refers to the European period of history, which started from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century in Europe when most people of medieval Europe witnessed harsh, submissive and uncomfortable life. It was famous for the fall of the Roman Empire, the Hundred Years' War, the spread of the bubonic plague, the decrease in economic and scientific development, the rise of the Feudal system and the growth of religious conflicts.

Religion had a considerable value during the medieval era more than in other periods of history. It contributed to shaping several aspects of the society of the Middle Ages. Catholicism was the spread religion in medieval Europe as in France, Germany, Italy and England. The Roman Catholic Church was the most vigorous institution of that time, so it exercised tremendous power and an enormous influence on politics, society, culture, economy and daily life. The Middle Ages is the time when people had great religious beliefs, many males and females, chose to become monks and nuns during their adulthood. They accordingly devoted themselves to God and religious services. Moreover, noble families and wealthy persons gave



the Church lands and they tried to preserve monasteries , which were situated in their cities, believing that through this generosity they would enter Heaven. They also paid money to be forgiven and to perform sacraments such as marriage and baptism.

The Church gave spiritual direction; it also played a crucial role in the administration of the sacraments, which included baptism, communion and confession. These practices were thought to be necessary for salvation. In addition to that, the Church was in charge of society's moral and ethical behavior. It used its teachings to justify the existing social order of that time. Generally, religion had an essential role in the Middle Ages, impacting behavior and shaping beliefs along with providing a structure for understanding the world.

During the Middle Ages, the Pope was a figure of great authority and power. He was commonly referred to as the Bishop of Rome and served as the spiritual head of the Church. The pope's role went beyond religious matters, including political and diplomatic responsibilities as well. Settling disputes between kings, the exercise of authority over the clergy and religious institutions were all activities that the Papacy often engaged in to form medieval Europe. The building of great cathedrals, the development of religious orders and the spread of Christianity all over Europe during medieval times were all examples of the papacy's influence.

Most medieval people were illiterate, Latin was the language of the Church and the Bible was also written in Latin (Vulgate). The Catholic Church prohibited the Bible to be translated into other languages. So, only well-educated people and clergy (priests, bishops...) who could read it. The latter were exhorted to master many languages including Hebrew, Latin and Greek.

In the Late Middle Ages and more specifically in January 1348, a great epidemic called "The Black Death" ravaged Europe and killed nearly 60% of the European population. It started first in Asia and spread then to Europe and it is considered the most devastating plague in the history of mankind. The source of the Black Death was a bacterium called *Yersinia pestis* that was

transmitted by fleas, to rats and then to humans. The plague had various symptoms, it attacked people's bodies and generally drove them to their death. The plague did not only impact health but also the economy, trade, society and religion as well. According to some scholars, the disease was spreading only by touching someone else's body or simply by being in contact with infected persons. People were dying without servants and had been burned in groups as layers without the presence of priests. Life became very sorrowful.

Scholars and researchers have different views about the causes of the plague. The French physician and surgeon Guy De Chauliac (1300- 1368), who had witnessed the plague, believed in the Miasma theory. He maintains that the plague was spreading speedily because of the noxious air, which could be harmful to individuals. When the plague arrived in France in June, the faculty of Medicine in Paris claimed that there was a conjunction between three higher planets including Jupiter, Mars and Saturn on March 20th, 1345.

During the crisis, Jews were facing persecution and discrimination from European Christians because they were blamed for poisoning the drinking water in Europe and were considered to be the reason for the outbreak of the plague. As a result, Jewish communities received a lot of violence and were hated. Samuel Cohen (qtd. In Mark), a Professor of Medieval History at the University of Glasgow, concedes that "The Black Death unleashed hatred, blame, and violence on a more horrific scale than by any pandemic or epidemic in world history."

John Kelly also asserts that nutrition and sanitation were two rarely existing things in the Middle Ages. During the period of the Black Death, sanitary conditions were so important to prevent the spread of the infection of the disease, because the black rats fed on human garbage. So, the more the streets, homes, and farms of society were filthy, the larger the risk was. People, who often washed, were less attracted to the flea infection, while those, who washed rarely, were more exposed to the infection. Some people were living with their animals in houses that had permeable walls and roofs,

which made them more likely to be infected because they were exposed to more fleas and rats. He also claims that malnutrition is considered one of the main causes of the plague widespread. Among the consequences of the war, the population suffered from famine, starvation, and malnutrition. About 10 to 15% of the European population lost their lives because of starvation. Most of the English population before the beginning of the Black Death (1348- 1350), suffered from a chronic deficiency of protein, calcium, and vitamin B12 for a period of one generation, much longer than the three years of bad harvest and grain famine, which usually attributed to the Great Famine (1315- 1317). The structural evidence suggests that The Great Famine thinned the population of the weakest individuals and the Great Bovine Pestilence (1319- 1320), which caused a scarcity of dairy products, created a generation of people who were less healthy than those who had survived the famine, and who therefore were particularly susceptible to the ravages associated with The Black Death. As a result, the lack of nutrition, sanitation and immunity for medieval people in Europe was among the basic reasons for the supernormal death rate.

Historians claim that understanding the past is not at all a simple matter and it is the case with the Black Death. According to the works cited, many studies have been done on the topic of the Black Death. Scholars and historians are now approached to the main causes of the plague and its devastating consequences. The following research aims chiefly to examine the phenomenon of the Black Death in the light of Christian theology. More precisely, it analyses the belief that the plague was a sign of God's wrath and the decline of the Roman Catholic Church, the greatest institution of the Middle Ages.

The references of this dissertation are written according to the MLA format 8th edition. In terms of structure, this dissertation is divided into an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. As a start and before embarking on the analysis, we find it needful to provide the readers with a background of our theme which is "The Black Death in the Middle Ages". So, the

first chapter is devoted to a general overview of the Middle Ages and the Black Death. Then, in the second chapter, we put an emphasis on the Christian belief about the Black Death and God's punishment because of sins, and we explore the religious practices used to gain salvation. At last, in the third chapter, we try to analyze how the plague drove the corruption, the failure of the most powerful institution in the Middle Ages and how it led people to emphasize personal spirituality.

In conclusion, we sum up the vital findings of this study and explore the effects of the Black Death on the Catholic Church and the clergy as a whole. Also, we conclude that the plague contributed to weaken confidence and faith of the Christian people towards the Church and its leaders. Especially when the departure of the Church's seasoned and invaluable members due to the devastating impact of death had significant ramifications. These experienced individuals had been instrumental in alleviating the fear of death among European Christians. However, with their departure, a sense of panic and paranoia arose as many priests chose to flee leaving their posts unattended. This absence of spiritual guidance and support further heightened people's anxieties, especially when it came to seeking services and comfort during times of illness.(I rewrote this) The Church decided to hire unqualified young priests to fill the empty positions left by older clerics. While most of the clergy members tried in every way they could to provide spiritual and material support to those affected by the Black Death, others took advantage of the messed-up situation and sought wealth and money. The selling of indulgences remains the best example which illustrates how the Church exploited the crises for personal ends.

## **Chapter One: Overview of the Middle Ages and the Black Death**

### **Introduction**

It is very difficult to think of life without technology and life facilitators that we depend on today, such as electricity, toilets, bathrooms, and running water. However, during the Middle Ages, people could survive without all these tools. They were living in very simple conditions using traditional tools when technology was not discovered yet, though life was very harsh and miserable. Then in the late Middle Ages, a lot of diseases and problems such as famine and plagues appeared.

In this chapter, we aim concisely to examine the Middle Ages and the most devastating plague in the history of mankind, “The Black Death”. First, we will get to know the life of medieval people and the place of religion in the society. Second, we will take an overview of “The Black Death”, its arrival in Europe, and its effects. And lastly, we will mention the major things that were considered to be the main causes of the bubonic plague.

### **1. The Middle ages**

Humanity had known several periods in history, but the Middle Ages were the most interesting ones with many significant events that changed Europe forever. The middle ages began in the 5<sup>th</sup> century with the decline of the Roman Empire and lasted until the 15<sup>th</sup> century with the discovery of America and the beginning of the Renaissance. It was a period known for its cruelty, great plagues, devastating wars, and backward of arts as well.

#### **1.1Life in the Middle ages**

There were two different classes in society during Middle Ages; the lower class consisted of peasants, who represented the largest number of people, working for lords, and farming lands to make crops grown. The Medieval society in England was under the rule of feudalism, which was

both social and political system of rights and obligations to the king, including the exchange of lands and services; it means that the person, who gave a land (fief) to someone; was the lord of that person, and the person, who received the land, became the lord's vassal. This vassal usually has to provide the lord with military service; to give him money from time to time. So the king gave a lot of his kingdom as large fiefs to his nobles, and these in return gave smaller fiefs for lesser lords and so on. This system created a kind of pyramid of mutual support starting from the king downwards to the lord of a single village and peasants.

The majority of people lived in the countryside and worked as farmers on the lord's land to grow sufficient food to survive the following year. As for the life in the city, things were quite different. There were crowded and dirty cities, people worked as craftsmen and young boys worked as trainees for seven years learning a craft. In addition to that, people lived in crowded houses consisting of only one or two rooms and sometimes everyone slept in the same room with their animals. Besides, these houses were away from being comfortable: they were dark and full of fire smoke.

## **1.2 Power of religion**

After the decline of the Roman Empire, the peoples of the European continent could not be united under one government. However, the Roman Catholic Church was one of the strongest institutions of the Middle Ages, as it became the single fundamental source of guidance and salvation.

Catholicism was the spread religion at that time; the Church was called the Roman Catholic Church and had a great impact on European society to the extent that every queen, knight, and soldier lived under the power of the Catholic Church and even the king when he wanted to accomplish an issue, he was obliged to consult a Pope, who was the head of the Catholic Church. By 1050, the Church was the largest landholder in Europe; each person was expected to give one-tenth of his money,

produce or labor to help support the Church. Hence, the Church became extremely wealthy. As for the Pope, he had the power to decide who would be a king in some regions and was able to raise an army and go to war.

The most essential thing in the medieval era was the belief in God which is why historians call the Middle Ages “The Age of Faith”. The Christian belief was so widespread; everything was related to God. The writers’ ultimate aim was to teach people the Bible and Catholic doctrines and the life of Saints. People referred to the Church for the understanding of natural events: storms, diseases and famine were thought to be punishments sent by God, so they hoped that prayers and religious devotion would keep them safe from such disasters.

The church in the Middle Ages was more than just a way of connecting to God; it was a belief system, Christianity did not focus only on people’s relationship with God, but it also explained the history, science, ethics, how one should behave and so on.

The church was responsible for many things, which in our current time, we would wait for the government to take care of them such as education, morality and charity.

For the church, to gain more power and more control over the regions, it developed its own set of laws called “Canon Law”. Medieval Canon Law was based on the Bible, the Catholics needed to follow this set of laws, because it included religious teachings accepted by the Church, crimes, the role of the clergy and marriage.

In case of breaking The Canon Law, could lead to “Excommunication”, which means the limiting or ending of a person’s membership in the Catholic Church; those who were excommunicated could not receive the sacraments (sacred ceremonies of the church) or a Christian burial, which many of them believed it could lead them to hell for eternity.

Excommunication was used by the Popes and other leaders in the church to punish those who were against them. If any king or a noble opposed or disagreed with them, the whole region (which was ruled by that king or noble) would be excluded from receiving holy sacraments in the Catholic Church.

## **2. The Black Death**

### **2.1 What is the Black Death?**

Humanity had known three major plagues: the first was during the 6<sup>th</sup> century known as the “Plague of Justinian”, which destroyed the Byzantine Empire and the last occurred during mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the most devastating plague was the one that killed more than 50 million people and more than half of the population, known as the “Black Death” during the late Middle Ages, in 1336. The Black Death is also known as the “Bubonic Plague”, which is a disease caused by the bacterium “Yersinia Pestis”. This bacterium had some characteristics: it was pneumonic, so it attacked foremost the lungs, the bubonic plague outputted swellings of the lymphatic glands which is why it was called a bubonic plague. In addition to that, it could make the plagued person dead quickly. The incubation period of the disease is nearly from 2 to 8 days, it was spreading speedily that people who seemed perfectly healthy, might be dead overnight; when going to bed at night they could be dead by the morning.

The disease attacked the lymphatic system and it had two main types: Bubonic and Pneumonic plague. These two types shared some unpleasant symptoms as chills and fever. But they were different in other symptoms. The bubonic plague was characterized by vomiting, diarrhea, buboes, swellings under the armpits, and some parts of the body as the fingers toes became dark. It was said that this kind of plague was spreading by rats and its death rate was about 50%. However, the pneumonic plague was characterized by cough, pain in all the parts of the body, a terrible headache, an infection of blood and lungs, and breathlessness that was



followed by death. It was spreading from one person to another by sneeze or cough through transmitting air droplets, which contained the bacteria, and its death rate was nearly 100%.

It got its name from the black spots that it leaves on the person's skin as a result of a blood hemorrhage. At the beginning of its emergence, it was called "pestilence" by medieval authors. However, the name "Black Death" was given for the first time in 1823 by a British historian named "Elizabeth Penrose", and it was also called by the Germans "The Great Dying".

People thought that only by touching someone else's clothes or hands would the disease be transmitted. However, it was spreading through the bites fleas infected by rats, which had been brought by the trading ships, and these fleas passed the bacteria to the human bloodstream. The plague was unstoppable, and it was so difficult to prevent its transmission.

Additionally, it ingested Eurasia and damaged its population, "The plague bacillus, *Yersinia Pestis*, swallowed Eurasia the way a snake swallows a rabbit" (Kelly 21).

The Black Death was the most awful disease, which had left an unimaginable number of deaths in the European population. "According to the Foster scale, a kind of Richter scale of human disaster, the medieval plague is the second greatest catastrophe in the human record. Only World War II produced more death, physical destruction, and emotional suffering, says Canadian geographer Harold D. Foster, the scale's inventor" (Kelly 20).

## **2.2 The arrival of the Black Death to Europe**

The famous fourteenth-century Muslim historian IbnKhalidun (qtd. In Dols) recognized the import of the pandemic for Islamic civilization:

In the middle of the eighth [fourteenth] century, civilization in the East and West was visited by a destructive plague which devastated nations and caused populations to vanish. It swallowed up many of the good things of civilization and

wiped them out. It overtook the dynasties at the time of their senility, when they had reached the limit of their duration. It lessened their power and curtailed their influence. It weakened their authority. Their situation approached the point of annihilation and dissolution. Civilization decreased with the decrease of mankind. Cities and buildings were laid waste, roads and way signs were obliterated, settlements and mansions became empty, dynasties and tribes grew weak. The entire inhabited world changed. The East, it seems, was similarly visited though in accordance with and in proportion to (the East's more affluent) civilization. It was as if the voice of existence in the world had called out for oblivion and restriction, and the world had responded to its call.

At the beginning, people heard about the "Great Pestilence", but they did not believe in it until it touched them. The Black Death originated in South Asia in 1346 and spread later on to the Middle East, Europe, China, and India along the international trade routes; the first victim of the bubonic plague in England was in June 1348. So it was likely spread by trading ships and dead rats because, at that time, there was an exchange of trade between Europe and Asia.

The calamity swept the English Channel to England and London during mid-1348 and the first victim of the bubonic plague in England was in June 1348.

### **3.Social and Economic Effects of the Black Death**

This greatest disaster touched all the social classes, including rich and poor people, males and females, young and old, strong and weak. The plague was characterized by fever, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and abdominal pain. It was considered the most atrocious plague in the history of humankind. "My breath causes children to wither and die like young plants in the spring snow. I bring destruction. No matter how beautiful a woman, once she has looked at me she becomes as

ugly as death. And to men, I bring not death alone, but the destruction of their children and the blighting of their wives....No people who looks upon me is over the same” (Kelly 20).

Although the plague affected all people without exception, children and women, especially pregnant ones, were more vulnerable to the epidemic “The Black Death was particularly cruel to children and to women, who died in greater numbers than men, probably because they spent more time indoors, where the risk of infection was greater, and cruellest of all to pregnant women, who invariably gave birth before dying” (Kelly 24).

After being attacked by the plague in Europe, the disease killed nearly 60% of the European population. In England, the peasants were very affected by the plague. The Black Death led to the dispersal and collapse of European societies little by little, to the point that the brother abandoned his brothers and sisters and very often the wives renounced their husbands, but the worst thing that could not be imagined was that parents were unaccepted to see their children while being touched by the plague as if they were not theirs, having fear of getting infected by the disease as well.

Society suffered from a disorder; faith in religion decreased after the plague because of the failure of prayers to prevent sickness and death. In addition to that, the economy underwent a sudden and extreme inflation since it was very difficult and dangerous to buy goods through trade and produce them. Hence, the prices of both goods produced locally and those imported from afar increase.

Because of the illness and deaths, the number of workers decreased, even the peasants felt the effects of the new rise in wages, and then the demand for people to work the land became so high. The vassals were no longer tied to one master; if one left the land, another would instantly hire them because the lords were obliged to make changes in order to make the situation more profitable for peasants, and so keep them in their land. In general, wages exceeded prices, and standards of living increased later.

As a result of the beginning of blurring financial distinctions, social distinctions sharpened; the styles adopted by the nobility grew increasingly opulent with the intent of accentuating the social standing of the individual donning the attire. As a result, there ensued a modest augmentation in the influence wielded by the peasant class, and they revolted when the aristocracy tried to resist the changes brought by the plague. In 1358, the peasants of northern France rioted, and in 1378, disenfranchised guild members revolted, so the social and economic structure of Europe was radically and irreparably changed.

### **3. The Fictitious Causes of Plague**

#### **3.1 Conjunction of Planets**

The conjunction of planets was among the causes of the Black Death, according to medieval scholars. Popes during the late Middle Ages settled in Avignon, a city in South France known as the center of art and theology. The authority was taken by “Pope Clement VI”, who had a physician named “Guy De Chauliac”. De Chauliac, 1300- 1368 was the father of surgery and a papal physician in 1348. He believed in the “Miasma theory,” and he was among the scientists of the University of Paris who wanted to know the real cause of the plague, and they found that there was a conjunction of three higher planets in Aquarius that were Mars, Saturn, and Jupiter, which mainly led to a corruption of the air. Because of the conjunction, Jupiter became wet and hot, making evil vapors from the earth, and Mars was hot and dry to an immoderate degree, then ignited the vapors, which caused lightning sparks, damaging vapors, and fires all over the air. When breathing polluted air, it would penetrate people’s hearts, which later led to a greater death.

#### **3.2 Extermination of Cats**

Gregory IX was born before 1170 in Rome and died in 1241. He was an Italian theologian, lawyer of the church, founder of the papal inquisition, and ruler of the Catholic world from 1227 until 1241. Pope Gregory IX, who was a nephew of Pope Innocent III, had a great hatred towards

cats, especially black ones, believing that they had satanic rituals and helped in practicing witchcraft, so he decided to exterminate the cats. According to him, in 1232, black cats were a sign of bad luck, servants of wickedness, and a source of bane all over the world, so they could not be trusted. In addition to that, he believed that a demon is a half cat, and sometimes, in some cases, Satan is represented in the form of a cat during demonic rituals.

The war declared by Pope Gregory IX against cats affected not only those pets but also people. The Pope passed a law punishing sorceresses by burning them with their cats as well. Moreover, each person who earned a cat was directly considered as a witch and after a period of time, innocent women, as nuns, who were keeping cats as their pets, were accused of practicing witchcraft, which led to their torture, and their cats were also slaughtered. In 1233-1234, the Roman Catholic Church and Western Europe started to exterminate cats. Later on, people wanted to show their loyalty towards the Pope and church by annihilating of cats. Then the number of cats extremely decreased, and the number of rats increased on the other hand. The lack of cats after the extermination led to the spread of rats, which were the primary and main cause of the plagues. But at that time, they were not aware that the cats' annihilation would sharply raise the number of rats, which would spread the disease.

### **3.3 Water poisoning by the Jews**

Jewish communities represented a smaller part of the population than other communities. They were considered minorities in Europe. They had their own religion, beliefs, traditions, and languages (Hebrew or Yiddish). During the late Middle Ages, Christians allowed Jews to settle in their lands; they had known a kind of freedom in some European regions, such as Northern France, Germany, and England. The Jews did not have their own districts known as “ghettos”, but they lived with their Christian neighbors, sharing economies and trade.

However, when the Black Death arrived in Europe, Christians were blaming the Jews for poisoning the wells in 1349 in Strasburg (France) and Germany. On August 24<sup>th</sup>, 1349, nearly 6,000 of Jewish people were massacred and burned alive. The Jews were targeted because they had a lower death rate during the pestilence than the Christians, although they were living in the same lands. But some modern scholars refute such a postulate maintaining that Jewish people had better hygiene than Christians. Indeed, they washed their hands many times a day: before and after meals, after awakening in the morning, etc. Besides, they were traditionally meticulous about taking care of their bodies: cutting nails, showering, getting haircuts and shaving. As believers, they observed the Torah, which exhorted them to be clean and healthy before God. “Jews do a lot of hand washing. We wash when we wake up, before we eat, and after we eat. We wash after being in a cemetery or at a funeral. We wash after using the bathroom. All of these practices are discussed in their appropriate places.” (Dov Lev)

But the long animosity toward Jews led the medieval Christians to suspect them of poisoning wells, murdering Christian children in secret rites, and practicing various forms of magic in order to injure or kill Christians.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this whole chapter, we have attempted to make the reader familiar with the great pestilence that reached Europe during the Middle Ages from 1347 until 1351 and turned life into darkness. We have provided a general overview of the Middle Ages and the great importance of religion during that time. In addition to that, we have introduced the definition of “The Black Death”, its first arrival in Europe, its fictitious main causes, and the impact that it left on society and the economy. So, in our coming chapter, we will examine the interpretation of the Black Death within the Christian view and its influence on the church and religion as well.

## **Chapter II: The Black Death and Christian Faith**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, we will explore the interpretation of the Black Death in the light of Christian theology. In the first step, we will shed light on the major judgments of the bubonic plague during the Middle Ages. In addition to that, we will examine how European Christians linked the plague to sins and to God's wrath. Then, we will attempt to see how Christians sought to appease God for the sake of reducing his anger.

The Roman Catholic Church controlled everything during the Middle Ages in the western world, not only religion but also education, politics, science, and philosophy. Plagues and diseases had huge influences on societies. When the Black Death reached Europe, Christians responded with profound guilt and fear. They believed that God expressed his wrath by sending a pestilence to mankind and the only solution to reduce the high rate of death was to return to God. So they related their hope to the Roman Catholic Church, searching for some answers about the horrible pandemic. These beliefs led to a great focus on the performance of religious commitments like sacraments and religious rituals as a way of salvation.

### **1. Different Views of the Black Death**

As the Middle Ages were known for the ignorance of their people, they could not understand the biology of the disease. When the pandemic appeared in the fourteenth century, numerous individuals sought solace in religion as a means of comprehending and addressing the tragedy.

The responses to the Black Death during the medieval period can be linked to a religious tale woven from devout beliefs, aimed at deciphering the implications of the plague. Thus, these devout beliefs facilitated the construction of religious narratives, which serve as a form of discourse delineating proper conduct based on divine principles to elucidate and interpret specific phenomena. Additionally, the multifaceted interpretations of the Black Death by medieval society echoed a diversity of perspectives and convictions prevalent during that era.

The scientific method had not yet been invented. When faced with a problem, people in the Middle Ages found the solution through diachronic (as opposed to synchronic) analysis. The diachronic is the historical narrative, horizontally developing through time: “Tell me a story”. With their fervent historical imagination, medieval people were very good at giving diachronic explanations for the outbreak of bubonic plague. Cantor (qtd. In Mark)

### **1.1The Muslims View**

It was mentioned by some scholars such as Michael W. Dols that “there is no doctrine of original sin and man's insuperable guilt in Islamic theology.” Hence, Muslims didn't interpret the plague as a punishment from God because of their sins.(REF) However, they believed that the Black Death was God almighty's will; he gave it to humanity as martyrdom and a merciful opportunity for the believers and the faithful Muslims for the sake of ensuring their place in paradise, and it was a punishment as well as a pain only for the infidel people, this notion was consistent with Islamic teachings. According to Islamic doctrine, deaths by diseases or battles are linked with God's favor, and the dead are guaranteed to enter paradise.

The freelance writer, journalist, and scholar Joshua J. Mark says in his article that Muslims viewed the arrival of the Black Death as a compassionate blessing from God, and it granted martyrdom to the faithful ones, who were immediately transported to paradise. In addition to



that, it was recommended for them to neither enter nor leave regions affected by the plague, and the infection of the plague was not due to its transmission between people because the disease was directly sent from God (according to the Islamic teachings). However, as it was believed, it had been immediately inflicted upon certain individuals by God's order. Muslims responded to the epidemic by fasting and praying to God to lift the plague.

## **1.2 The Christians View**

On the other hand, Christians believed that the outbreak of the plague was seen as a divine punishment for the transgressions of humanity; they also saw that it was contagious and spread from one person to another. The Roman Catholic Church explained the plague primarily as God's wrath for people's sins; the suffering was because of humans' sins, and as a result, God sent that pestilence.

### **1.2.1 Wrathful God punishing a sinful Mankind**

When one of the greatest pandemics of the history reached Europe, Christians promptly associated it with God's punishment, considering it a consequence of their sins. This connection was reinforced by a series of natural calamities that affected the medieval world, such as events like The Year Without Summer (1257), The Sicily Earthquake (1169), The Kamikaze, also known as the "Divine Wind" (1274 and 1281), among others. These natural disasters played a role in persuading people that the plagues and misfortunes were, in fact, a result of their wrongdoings.

Many European Christians understood that the Black Death was a sign of the end of the world and a challenge sent by God to test their devotion. Others saw it as a divine penalty for moral corruption, greed, and sexual immorality. For instance, there was a thing that puzzled English people concerning King Eduard II. It was known that "kings were supposed to like wars, hunting, jousting, and women, but Eduard's tastes had run to theatricals, arts and crafts,

minstrels, and men” (Kelly 221). Eduard II was a homosexual man who loved the knight Piers Gaveston more than his French wife, Princess Isabella. Homosexuality is considered guilt as stated in the Bible: “And if a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them.” Leviticus 20:13. The Bible prohibits sexual relationships with the same sex, which is contrary to God’s command. It means that if a man has a sexual relationship with another man, both of these individuals violated of God’s laws. As a result, this deed prevents people from entering the Kingdom of God, and they deserve severe punishment and death for their deeds.

### **3. Responses of the Plague**

When the bubonic plague broke out in the Middle Ages, people tried many things to prevent and cure the Black Death. So, the majority of methods they tried were based on their beliefs. Christians viewed the great pestilence as a divine punishment because of humanity’s sinfulness. Hence, they responded to it by repenting of their sins and devoting themselves to God. So, religious marches (processions) were organized during the plague, which started from certain points in the cities and went to the church or shrine and were commonly devoted to the Virgin Mary. Also, the individuals would engage in fasting, praying, and buying talismans or trinkets in order to protect themselves. Despite the fact that Christians were aware of the plague’s contagion, they persisted in performing these processions because they believed that there was no alternative means of reducing God's anger.

#### **3.1 The Flagellant movement**

During the Black Death, some extremist individuals and groups engaged in flagellation as a reaction to the epidemic. It is a kind of religious penance and a form of response that seeks God's mercy. The flagellant movement, as it was known, is a kind of collective or self-punishment that appeared in 1348 CE in Eurasia and was created by passionate medieval Christians from

different ages and genders who gathered together and walked barefoot from one place to another, practicing flagellation as a form of religious or spiritual expression and discipline. They punished and whipped themselves publicly in such a harsh way that their blood was plashing on the walls, using some instruments such as whips in order to beat the back or parts of the body of themselves or other individuals.

The Flagellants' genius was to transform this erotically charged private self abuse into public theater. During the mortality, troupes of fifty to five hundred Flagellants tramped across the landscape of central and northern Europe, Bringing their passion play of blood, pain, and redemption to the multitudes. At Each new town or village, a troupe would announce its arrival with a lusty chorus of deep-throated singing. As the sound of a "sweet melody" rose above the tree line like a "Heaven bound Angel," church bells would peal, windows open, people rush into the streets. Quickly a crowd would gather in the town square. As the singing grew nearer, the townsfolk would grasp hands and begin to sway back and forth in rhythm. Then, just as villagers' eardrums were about to burst from the roar of approaching voices, a wall of brilliant purple and gold banners would appear at the far end of the village square. At the sight of Flagellants—shoeless, hooded, and dressed in white cloaks, with a red cross on the front and back—shouts of "Save us!" would rise from the crowd. Some spectators wept; swooning women clasped their hands to their breasts; a few people laid their dead in the square for a blessing. If the town had any Jews, they went into hiding; the Flagellants were violently anti-Semitic. As the troupe marched to the local church, their brilliant pennants billowing and snapping in the wind, the members would sing (Kelly 220-221).

This social phenomenon was chiefly based on the belief that flagellants wanted to atone people's sins as well as the sins of mankind as a whole to appease God's wrath, to express dedication for him, and to live a holy and pure life. These pilgrim groups of penitents wanted, by doing this act, to show the torment and suffering that Jesus had received while being flogged and dying on the cross as a sacrifice to pay for the sins of humanity. These people considered this act as a religious penance to purify themselves from their sins. Other groups of flagellants walked in cities, hiding their faces but not their bodies to show the slashes. As the specialist in narrative history, John Kelly, mentions in his book

As the plague made its way through the primeval forests of Germany, another demon bubbled up from the medieval Teutonic psyche: the Flagellants, who believed the curse of the mortality could be lifted through self-abuse of the flesh and slaying Jews. Twenty years later one spectator could still recall the hysteria of the Flagellants aroused. The men, he writes, "lashed themselves viciously on their naked bodies until the blood flowed, while crowds, now weeping now singing, shouted, 'Save us!'" (Kelly 34).

The person who is responsible for the flagellant movement generally takes a "Heavenly Letter," reading it to call people to pray and plead with God to stop the plague. However, later, the Roman Catholic Church prohibited the practice of flagellation because it was considered a dangerous form of religious expression for Christian people.

### **3.2 The Persecution of Jews**

People are as strong as they are united and as weak as they are divided. Although, during times of crisis, it is significant that people become united like one hand to support each other and provide reciprocal help rather than discriminating against other people who are different from us, this was not the case with the Jewish communities in the late Middle Ages.

The persecution of alien groups during the plague of 1347-1352 was a dark and sorrowful part of history. As it was mentioned in the first chapter, Jews were considered to be among the reasons for the outbreak of the bubonic plague; they were blamed for poisoning the drinking water in Europe, and they became untrustworthy in the eyes of Christians, who allowed them to stabilize and work in their lands. In addition to that, they were seen as strangers because they had different religious beliefs and rituals that contradicted the Christian religion. As a result, European Christians reacted severely against the Jewish people. They received a lot of violence; they were attacked, murdered, and persecuted so, the calamity led the Jews to experience one of the most severe instances of oppression in history, which is also considered genocide.

In doing so, we can say that Christians wanted to stop the plague through the persecution of the Jews, who were thought to be responsible for the outbreak of the disease.

#### **4. Religious Commitments as a Way of Salvation**

There was neither treatment nor cure for the plague; the majority of people in the Middle Ages were illiterate, and those who survived the disease had only one place to go: the church. The belief of people concerning the plague as a divine punishment from God for human sinfulness had led to a sense of fear and hopelessness. The Roman Catholic Church believed that the only solution for Christians to put an end to the plague was to return to God and religion. The church called people to pray and plead with God, and it organized religious marches asking for redemption and salvation.

The researcher Florence Eccleston says in her article that the idea of the seven deadly sins appears to have risen during the Black Death's period in the mid-fourteenth century, as people became more focused on preparing for death and the afterlife. The prospect of dying without confessing their sins was a significant source of anxiety since it could lead to damnation. The Bible orders Christians to confess their sins to be forgiven, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful

and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9) This verse emphasizes the significant value of confessing sins, which includes admitting someone’s wrongdoings, and it confirms to people that when they confess their sins, God is faithful to forgive them, to show his mercy, and to purify them from their guilt.

Sacraments represent visible (outward) signs for invisible (inward) grace; they are significant aspects of Catholic theology and practice. The Roman Catholic Church celebrates seven holy sacraments, which are religious rituals and spiritual procedures of divine grace instituted by Jesus Christ and carried out by the church. The Bible states: “If any have trespassed, let him not partake until he makes reconciliation” (D&C 46:4) These sacraments (state them) are an efficient sign of mercy. Christians believed that they could make their personal faith deeper through the practice of these sacraments, and they became able to be closer to God. Hence, Christians considered the sacraments a gift from God to transmit mercy and blessings to those who received them.

However, during the outbreak of the bubonic plague, Christians emphasized the sacrament of healing, which is reconciliation, also known as confession. During the fourteenth century, confession, or, as it is called, penance, was a private sacrament, and every person should do it at least once a year. It is seen as a healing for Christians’ souls for their sins; the person takes responsibility for his own sins, confesses them to God through a priest, and asks for forgiveness and absolution. People needed to consider all their previous wrongdoings and feel sorry for disobeying and violating God’s divine laws instead of simply being afraid of being punished by God as a result of what they had done. Christians were obliged to confess their errors in the presence of their parish priest, who was given the power to release them from that guilt and to make confessors holy, and at last making a promise that they would never do such sins again.

However, the plague's waves could cause a disruption to the process of confession. Rapid sickness could prevent people from going to their parish priests, remembering their sins, or confessing them out loud. They had to search for new confessors when these parish priests were not quickly replaced after they died. Some people were obliged to confess without anyone giving them forgiveness. This problem caused anxiety and depression. So, as a response, people asked for help and treatment from doctors and saints. For instance, several Christians in “Provence”, a region in south-west France, went to a local holy woman called “Countess Delphine de Puimichel” to help them remember their sins and protect them from unexpected death. But the majority of people in Europe did not have a local sacred woman to go to. So they searched for other solutions, like indulgences, which were papal documents that could forgive the sins of the person who held them. They were intended to be given by the Pope under very precise circumstances, such as finishing a pilgrimage or performing good and pious works.

In the fourteenth century, the majority of Christians believed that the path to heaven was through Purgatory, where any unforgiving sin would be burned through suffering. Christians, therefore, thought that masses conducted in their names could bring forgiveness for their sins after they die. They also left money in their wills for the masses so as not to spend much time in Purgatory.

Also, saints had an important role during the medieval era in European religious and cultural life. They were a source for spiritual guidance and inspiration, and they were regarded as a link between people and God; and all Christians relied on them to express and practice their faith during the plague. Venerating and honoring saints through the Middle Ages played a significant role and reinforced the concept of communal belonging within the Roman Catholic Church. For instance, Christians used saints' images, generally in the form of paintings or statues, as a means to concentrate their prayers and devotions for the sake of being free from the disease.

People thought that through the intercessions of saints, they could receive a kind of healing and security from the plague.

One famous instance of worshiping saints in the Middle Ages during the Black Death was devotion to “Saint Sebastian”. It was said that St. Sebastian had a great strength and capacity to exclude the arrows from the purposed victims towards himself, which made European Christians, who suffered from the pestilence, optimistic about having protection and being delivered from the disease as well.

To perform this ritual, Christians would ignite candles at the feet of the saint’s image, praying and asking for his intercessions because he was thought to have significant power to protect and solve people’s problems during epidemics and diseases. So people would pray to St. Sebastian and utter some phrases such as: “O St. Sebastian, guard and defend me, morning and evening, every minute of every hour, while I am still of sound mind; and, Martyr, diminish the strength of that vile illness called an epidemic which is threatening me. Protect and keep me and all my friends from this plague.” And also: “O martyr Sebastian! Be with us always, and by your merits keep us safe and sound and protect us from plague. Commend us to the Trinity and to the Virgin Mary, so that when we die we may have our reward: to behold God in the company of martyrs.” Harrox (qtd. in Scerri)

According to the English historian Rosemary Harrox, these prayers to the saints illustrate an example of what a “good” death meant during the pestilence and also teach people the notion that believers must be ready for a sudden death by arranging their souls beforehand.

Relics are seen as physical objects linked with sacred persons like saints and martyrs. By medieval European Christians, they were thought to have supernatural power because they could grant protection and healing, and they were symbolic of hope and faith. They had significant value in medieval worship. People glorified artifacts by going to visit them and offering gifts for



the sake of receiving, in return, protection from the holy dead. So, relics in general played an important role in people's reactions to the Black Death.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this whole chapter, we have tried to examine how the Church and Christian beliefs shaped different views about the Black Death. While some believed that it was God's punishment for their sins, others interpreted it as a test of their faith. As a consequence of people's beliefs about sin and punishment, we have mentioned how European Christians reacted in different ways. While some of them turned to religious practices like flagellant movement, praying, penance, and glorifying relics, including images of saints, as a way of appeasing God, gaining redemption from their sins, and protecting themselves from the disease, others reacted with aggression and cruelty against foreign communities, including the Jews, who were thought to be responsible for the outbreak of the plague.

The Black Death resulted in extensive loss of life, significantly affecting both Christian society and religious establishments. During that period of turmoil, the populace's optimism was closely associated with the church and its clergy. However, even they struggled to devise effective remedies against the illness. Consequently, this played a role in the diminishment of the Roman Catholic Church's influence as individuals began to disengage from it due to its apparent impotence.

## **Chapter three: The Church Failure and the Decline of Christian Faith**

### **Introduction**

During the Middle Ages, the Church was one of the strongest institutions in Europe. It controlled political and religious BLA BLA of all countries. It had a religious authority, so it was in charge of the enforcement of religious doctrine, the management of sacraments and the interpretation of the Bible as well. The Church also gave a kind of social welfare such as providing care for sick and poor people, and it was responsible for the spread of knowledge and for teaching people, who were ignorant of ethics and the purpose of existence and explaining the concept of the afterlife.

The arrival of the great pestilence to Europe in 1347 made people think that it was the end of the world, the plague did not affect only the social and the economic aspect but also the religious fabric. Catholicism was the religion of medieval Europe. Since the Roman Catholic Church during The Middle Ages was the head of authority and the overseer of the rituals and sacraments, people were attached more to religion. Hence, they depended on the church to help and protect them during the plague. It is commonly known that the Church is formed for the sake of directing people and is supposed to be a source of religious guidance and support. However, it

became suspicious and helpless during the Black Death although it ruled and dominated everything in The Middle Ages. As a result, people started to change their beliefs about the church and question and criticize the authority, legitimacy and credibility of the Roman Catholic Church.

### **1. The Escape of the Papacy**

Well before the Black Death crisis, the Catholic Church was facing opposition from its followers. Most of them were angry about the papacy's move from Rome to Avignon at the beginning of the twelfth century. So when the epidemic struck, the relationship between the Church and Christians was put to the test. As the number of victims increased the Church needed the necessary assistance to calm the public. While the people of Avignon were reassured by Pope Clement IV, the people living outside of the city which was considered as a place of religious safety were left to fight their own battle against the plague. In addition to that, Priests went to areas where they would make money and profit from the wealthy or the recently deceased people.

While, the Muslims had received support from their religious institution to face the crisis of the pandemic, Catholics were left to defend themselves with feelings of fear, guilt and depression; this added fuel to the fire of Catholics who were already angry against their Church.

Pope Clement VI (1291-1352) took the papal throne and the authority of the Church during the Black Death. He was seen as God's representative on earth to ease God's anger, he imposed more services and religious prosperities. The Pope relied on his physician Guy De Chauillac, who believed in the Miasma theory. The better claimed that the plague was a result of Noxious Air and asked Pope Clement VI to isolate himself from all people. The Pope Clement VI left then the infected city to protect himself from the plague. However, Guy De Chauillac, as he was afraid of having a bad reputation, stayed in the city to help the sick. De Chauillac wrote a personal anecdote (qtd. In Armstrong) saying

And I, in order to avoid a bad reputation, did not dare depart from Avignon, but with a continuous fear, I preserved myself as best I could . . . Nonetheless, toward the end of the mortality, I fell into a continuous fever, with an aposteme on the groin, and I was sick for nearly six weeks. And I was in such great danger that all of my friends believed that I would die. And the aposteme ripened and healed, as I have described above, and I escaped by God's command.

But the idea of leaving the city discredited the papacy. Instead of staying to help his people, who depended on the Church seeking for protection and guidance during the crisis, the Pope gave up his responsibility, he abandoned simple people.

## **2. The Violation of Vows**

The Catholic Church was a political, economic and religious institution, which unified Western Europe under one religion. However, later on, it became secular, corrupt and moved far from religion. The church leaders including popes and bishops turned into royalists instead of being God's servants and they became highly rich and strong, other spiritual leaders as monks and nuns, who were belonging to the Regular Church, took vows of obedience and chastity, they wanted to obey God and devote themselves only to the Catholic Church vowed not to perform sexual relationships or to get married and have children. However, they did not respect those vows and they entered into sexual relationships and all that led to the ignorance and the decline of the Christian principles. Pope Leo X stated that when a priest already had a wife and a family, he was not obliged to desert them, but he must be celibate in his marriage. This declaration arose because people had a fear that if the clergy had heirs (sons), those heirs would inherit and take the land of the Church.

## **3. Exploitation of Money and Services**

During the medieval era, the Catholic Church became corrupt and it embraced worldly pursuits. In addition to the impiety and the corruption of the Church, which is an illegal and dishonest behavior or abuse of entrusted authority used especially by powerful people for their gain, had been widespread throughout history and it became a dangerous problem in the Late Middle Ages.

### **3.1 Indulgences and Simony**

The corruption attributed to the Roman Catholic was due to the selling or buying of ecclesiastical privileges such as indulgence. The Church was raising money in an illegal way to support the church by selling “indulgences”, which was a way to decrease the number of someone’s sins. It used indulgences as a reward to release people and free them from their guilts.

When a sinful person paid an indulgence, the pope provides him with a certificate that he was forgiven.

However, people were annoyed by the missed practice of indulgences because the Church leaders abused them for their interest. Generally, religious men gave vows of celibacy, poverty and obedience. Being poor is a sign of imitating the modesty of Christ and living a simple life, it is also considered to be a detachment from material properties. But through the selling of indulgences, Churchmen became wealthy, which means that they contradicted their vow of poverty.

In the 13th century, people were demanding whether it was possible to get an indulgence for dead people, who were supposed to be in purgatory, but it was not applied until Pope Sixtus IV in 1476 proclaimed that a person could obtain an indulgence for someone in purgatory. It means that when the Church informed people that their sins could be forgiven through paying indulgences, they asked to expand indulgences, and they requested the Church to apply these indulgences to deceased people, who were believed to be existed in purgatory.

The church also used other practices such as “Simony”, which was a system of selling and buying statuses, church roles, sacred things or, something related to the spiritual, which means that: to have and secure a job or a role in the Church, people easily paid money, instead of being selected based on their abilities and advantages and buyers did not carry out their duties. These practices were only for the sake of earning money for the profit of the Catholic Church. Because of the high rate of death among the clergy, the Catholic Church found itself in desperate need of priestly labor, so, it was forced to take in the inexperienced and the unskilled individual to fulfill its need. But the lack of Competency among the clergy caused the decline in the quality of clerical services and the Churchmen exploited their positions for their profits.

Philip Ziegler (qtd. In Zentner) writes, “During and immediately after the plague the usual rules governing the ordination of priests were virtually abandoned.” This means that during and after the epidemic, there were some social disturbances, including problems within the church. The usual rules governing the selection and ordination of priests were ignored because of the high mortality and the labor shortage in order to fill the urgent need of the infected population.

In general, we come to derive specifically that the central sources behind the corruption of the Church were the practices of selling indulgences and Church services as simony. The Roman Catholic Church was involved in selling indulgences; churchmen exchanged money with people, who committed sins, to gain in return deliverance from their sins, rather than depending on implementing good works to please God. As a consequence, later on, people became upset by the abuse of the indulgences, because instead of using them as sacred implements, the Church leaders exploited indulgences for their personal and financial earnings. This exploitation led Christians to have an untrustworthy perception of the Church’s acts.

#### **4. Shortage of Man Power and Unqualified Churchmen**

Since the Roman Catholic Church in the medieval era was the most powerful institution, Christians relied on it to receive help and guidance during crises. The period of the bubonic plague of the early fourteenth century was a disturbing time that affected both the common people as well as the church foundation, which witnessed a deep upheaval that mainly shook its principles.

The parish Church was the fundamental part of the Christian community, which provided the needful sacraments for the secularist. For the majority of medieval Christian people, religious experiences were concentrated around the parish Church that they attended during religious celebrations and on Sundays. However, when the great epidemic arrived in Europe, it did not touch only common people, but also struck religious men. About half of Priests and Bishops in the Church were suffering from the bubonic plague that mostly led to their death and other Churchmen gave up their parishes. As a result, the number of Churchmen decreased. In addition to that, the Church had to reduce the minimum age requirements, Norman Cantor asserts,

During and immediately after the Black Death, priests were ordained at twenty rather than twenty-five. Monastic vows could be administered to adolescents at age fifteen rather than twenty. Priests took over parish churches at age twenty instead of twenty-five. It was a younger, much younger Church that came suddenly into being, and one now staffed heavily with undereducated and inexperienced people.

The arrival of the Black Death in Europe led the priests and the clergy to face various difficulties and challenges and to take responsibility for taking care of the sick. In addition to that, those clergy were touched as well by the plague, and they had a high mortality rate. Some of them moved days and nights from their residences to go and visit the sick, which made them more exposed to the plague.

For instance, in England, John Kelly, in his book entitled *“The Great Mortality,”* says: “According to one estimate, only 27 percent of aristocratic and wealthy England died in the mortality, as opposed to 42 to 45 percent of the country’s parish priests, and 40 to 70 percent of the peasantry” (165).

Through this quote, we can deduce that, on the one hand, rich and aristocratic people were less affected by the Black Death; this might be because they could separate themselves from infected regions and possessed better medical care. On the other hand, the high number of deaths among priests indicates that they were in a more vulnerable position to the disease because of their close attachment to infected people. However, the higher mortality rate concerns peasants (from 40 to 70%) because they represent the majority of the population and live in overcrowded and unsanitary circumstances. The majority of these social groups are poor, so they have limited access to medical resources.

The enormous death rate among the clergy led the Church to confront the insufficiency of skillful priests. As a consequence, young and unqualified people were inducted to fulfill the Church's lack, which led the Churchmen to betray their statuses and exploit them for personal profits and led to the decline in the goodness of the clerical serving as well.

Many of these new clerical members were unable to read and understand the texts, which they were meant to preach to the people and their incompetence only made the Church's reputation among the Christian population even worse. Ziegler (qtd. In Zentner) concludes that during the aftermath of the first few years of the plague, “when society was slowly pulling itself together, the Church must have been singularly ill-equipped to give a lead.”

Everyone was facing death at every turn, the Italian poet “Giovanni Boccaccio” (qtd. In Zentner) said while describing this situation: “In this great affliction and misery of our city, the revered authority of both divine and human laws was left to fall and decay by those who



administered them. They too, just as other men, were all either dead or sick or so destitute of their families, that they were unable to fulfill any office. As a result, everyone could do just as he pleased.”

The decline of the church occurred because of the corruption of churchmen, or the clergy, who were the essential figures and doctors during the Middle Ages and were regarded as the link between the church and the common people. People were generally depending on the clergy to provide them with guidance whenever there were crises, such as plagues, but those churchmen were too weak to do their duties and unable to confront the pandemic. It was presupposed that churchmen should be literate and well-equipped with education. However, many of them were ignorant, not trained as the old ones, and they barely knew how to practice the religious rites, especially after buying and selling statuses just to gain money and without being aware of skillfulness or someone’s abilities. The Christian faith and confidence diminished because the church suffered just as people did, and they were able to see the weak side of the church

## **5. The Outcome of the Church’s Failure**

People saw that the Roman Catholic Church was neither helpful to make an end to the disease nor able to satisfy their needs of protecting them from the attack of the plague and giving them a sense of security. The Church started to be broken and weak in terms of political authority and people started to question its legitimacy and power. The decline of the Roman Catholic Church led later to the schism and the fracturing of the Christian world.

In addition to that, Christians started to question the credibility of the Church, its instructions and practices. They discovered that the most powerful institution, which was the fundamental source of guidance and protection in the Middle Ages, became corrupt and unable to protect them. This led later Christians to lose their confidence and faith in the Church and its leaders.

Many Christians looked for alternative ways to exercise their faith because the Church had failed to help them during the Black Death. Among these alternative ways were charity, which consisted in donating money to hospitals and pilgrimage, which rose hugely between 1349 and 1360. The pandemic reshaped Christians' thoughts of the clergy in Europe and assured the decline of their reputation for generations to come.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, we have tried to analyze how the plague exposed the flaws of the church, which included corrupt leaders, and how this corruption led Christians to change their beliefs about the institution. So, we have mentioned that the Black Death was a destructive plague that reached Europe in the fourteenth century and led to widespread panic, stress, anguish, and death. European Christians relied on the Church to guide them, but it was unable to fulfill their requirements and protect them during that difficult time. The corruption of the Roman Catholic Church and its helplessness to protect Christians during the Black Death led to its decline, a negative view of its authority, and some subsequent results, such as the emergence of skepticism and criticism of the institution. It also drove some individuals to reappraise their faith and religious practices. Corruption in this chapter includes various issues such as moral misbehavior and the abuse of power between churchmen.

## **General Conclusion**

The Middle Ages were the time of salvation; most people were ignorant and science was not well-developed. Hence, during the outbreak of the Black Death, they could not understand its nature and the causes of this phenomenon, which created confusion and uncertainty. People demanded clarification of what happened and they looked for answers from the Roman Catholic Church because it was the only source of knowledge and guidance at that time.

The theological understanding of the Black Death during the Middle Ages was a divine punishment of God due to people's collective sinful behaviors. Although there were alternative explanations to the causes of the disease, religious interpretation remained for long time predominant. The main reason for this belief is the wide spread of sins in most societies of Europe caused God's wrath and harsh punishment. As a consequence, this interpretation provoked panic and guilt among people. Many Christians engaged in religious practices and sacraments such as penance, confession, and self-flagellation to appease God and gain his mercy. So the plague was a kind of call for repentance, and the only way to be protected from such a disease was to seek God's forgiveness.

However, the Christian response to the plague in medieval times led many people to challenge and criticize the practices and beliefs of the church at that time. The priests' negligence in doing their duties was a vivid instance that demonstrates the Christians' trust in the Church being broken and it shows the clergy's unsuccessfulness to provide spiritual orientations and support that people expected from them.

The Black Death led Christians to question and doubt their faith in the Church. When the church and its leaders failed to help and serve Christians during the plague, people started to have an untrustworthy view towards the Church and religion and a division between common people and the church broke out, which led to a schism and the decline of the Christian faith and the fracture of the Roman Catholic Church.

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## **Résumé**

Cette recherche analyse la Peste Noire qui a ravagé l'Europe en XIVe siècle et son profond impact sur la théologie chrétienne de l'époque. Plus précisément, elle examine la façon selon laquelle la peste était une punition divine pour le péché. Cette étude aborde également la position et le rôle de l'Eglise catholique à faire face à cette crise. Enfin, elle démontre par des exemples historiques l'échec de ladite Eglise à assumer son autorité, comme ultime recours salutaire.

**Mots clés :** Echec, Eglise Catholique, Péchés, Peste Noir, Punition Divine, Théologie Chrétienne.

## الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة التأثير العميق للموت الأسود، وهو الوباء الذي دمر أوروبا في القرن الرابع عشر، على اللاهوت إنه يفحص الاعتقاد السائد بأن الطاعون كان عقابًا من الله على خطيئة الإنسان وكيف أثرت هذه الفكرة على المسيحي يستكشف هذا البحث الاستجابات المسيحية للوباء، مثل عقلية الناس، مما ساهم في النهاية في تراجع الكنيسة الكاثوليكية كما يستكشف دور الكنيسة في تقديم التوجيه والدعم. الاعتماد على الطقوس الدينية، والتكفير عن الذنب، وطلب رحمة الله بالإضافة إلى ذلك، يناقش كيف أضعفت الخسائر في الأرواح بسبب الطاعون مصداقية الكنيسة، الروحي للمتضررين وهذا جعل السلطة الدينية موضع شك، وساهم في تراجع خاصة عندما فشلت الصلوات والطقوس الدينية في وقف المرض الكنيسة الكاثوليكية، وتغيير أفكار الناس

الموت الأسود، اللاهوت المسيحي، فشل الكنيسة، العصور الوسطى، قوة الدين، الكنيسة الرومانية: **الكلمات المفتاحية**  
الكاثوليكية، الخطايا